

Changes in Writing Methods and Points of View: A Conversation with Margaret Drabble

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Abstract

The interviewer met Margaret Drabble in summer, 2011, and talked with her mainly about her novels. During the conversation, Drabble admitted that her way of writing had gradually become experimental, and expressed her present opinion about experimental novelists. Furthermore, she explained her reasons for writing about the relationships between mothers and children repeatedly in her novels, and then she talked about recent novelists' writing methods and about present English society in relation to her novels.

Keywords: Modern Novels, Experimental Novels, Writing Methods, English

The interviewer met Margaret Drabble (1939~) in the morning of September 15th, 2011, at the British Library, and talked with her for about two hours. The topics were mainly about her novels and other modern novelists. The day was sunny and their conversation proceeded smoothly. The following is a transcript of the whole conversation.

(N = interviewer, D = Drabble)

N: According to your biographical outline, you have three sisters or brothers, don't you?

D: I have two sisters and one brother.

N: Including you, then there are four of you. You got a scholarship to go to Newnham College, Cambridge, and got a first class degree there, didn't you?

D: Yes.

N: After publishing *The Millstone*, did you get a grant to go to Paris?

D: Yes, yes.

N: At the end of *Jerusalem the Golden*, the heroine, Clara went to Paris and stayed there for about a week. Does this theme depend on your experience in Paris?

D: Yes.

N: I heard that Kazuo Ishiguro read this novel and then made up his mind to become a novelist.

D: I've heard it has been said that he did. I think his mother liked the novel. And that's why he read it because his mother read it. And then he thought he would be a novelist. He said he read it and enjoyed it very much.

N: Which part of the novel did his mother like?

D: I don't know. I haven't talked with him about it. I heard him say it on the radio. I haven't talked to him person to person.

N: Then, what did Kazuo Ishiguro say about this novel?

D: He just said he read it and enjoyed it very much. That's all he said. That's all I've heard.

N: I see. You wrote your first novel in the 1960s, didn't you? I think your way of writing was similar to the style of your other early novels. As for the first three novels, you used first-person narration. In your fourth novel, *Jerusalem the Golden*, you used third-person narration but in the fifth novel, *The Waterfall*, you used first-person and third-person narrative shifting. Did you have any particular reason for using narrative shifting?

D: Yes, I used double narrative because it was a person who wasn't sure about the truth of her own stories. So she tells one story in the first person and one in the third person. But she's having an argument with herself about what is the truth. So she's discussing the truth with herself and that's a mixture of first person and third person. And lots of people do it now. It was quite unusual then. I mean the change of person has become more frequent. It was the first time that I had tried it.

N: But when you were young, you were against such experimental novelists as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. You said, "I *hate* books which are deliberately confusing. I aim to be lucid."¹ I think narrative shifting is some kind of writing technique.

D: But I don't think it is very complicated as a technique. I must say I am a great admirer of Virginia Woolf. So it's not that I don't admire her work so much, I was reacting against a different kind of experiment that was going around in

the 1960s, not Virginia Woolf's modernism. I reacted against a kind of French experimentation. I didn't like the French Nouveau Roman. I didn't like Robbe-Grillet who was very fashionable in the 1960s. I didn't like . . . I've changed my mind about Georges Perec, but I didn't like Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute very much. So it wasn't Virginia Woolf I was reacting against, it was much more recent ways of experimental writing.

N: I see. You married Clive Swift and you were separated from him in the early 1970s and got divorced from him in 1975. During this period, you wrote *The Waterfall* and the heroine, Jane, was suffering from some kind of difficult married life. Was your life in those days reflected in Jane's life?

D: Yes, yes. I wrote that novel at the time of the breakup of my marriage.

N: I think I have read an article in which you said so. I wanted to confirm it.

D: Yes, that is correct.

N: After *The Waterfall*, you wrote *The Needle's Eye* in 1972, didn't you? I think from around this time your writing style has gradually been changing. In *The Needle's Eye* you wrote about a working-class person such as Simon. He is from the working class and the heroine, Rose, is from the middle class. In your 60s novels, all the heroines belonged to the middle class. This is the first time you focused on a working-class person. You seem to be focusing on the life of a working-class person while writing about the life of Simon. Is this correct?

D: Yes, yes.

N: Then, you published *The Ice Age* in 1977 after *The Realms of Gold*. You wrote about the condition of England in this novel. In your 60s novels, you wrote about the lives of heroines only. They are some kind of *Bildungsroman*, I think. However, your writing themes seem to have gradually changed since your 70s novels. For example, you focused on working-class people and the condition of England. Why did you change your themes?

D: Well, I was always interested in the wider society. When we're very young, it's very hard to write a broad novel. I think most young people write quite small narratives. But as I got older, I felt more confident to be able to explore a larger section of society. So I felt it was a mission of growing older, knowing more people, knowing more people in different parts, different walks of life.

N: In *The Needle's Eye*, what did you want to focus on? The differences between classes or the life of Rose?

D: I was focusing on the difficulties of leading a good life when we live in a world where social classes are divided, money is very important and Rose is trying to lead a good life which is difficult for rich people. It's more difficult now than it was then. It was difficult then and she is trying to lead a simple life which is very difficult in modern times.

N: But Rose was the daughter of a middle-class couple and she was rich. She inherited a lot of money from her parents but she donated it to the poor. And she chose to live in a poor area. She got married to an immigrant, Christopher. He is Greek, so he is outside the British class system. I'm sorry to say such a thing but his class is lower, compared to Rose's. But she chose such a person as her partner. Rose chose to marry into the reverse of her birth class. I thought you wanted to focus on such a difficult life, what I mean is, to write about disadvantaged people's lives. Is this correct?

D: Yes, it is correct.

N: Judging from common people's thinking, Rose's way of life is strange. Many people aim to step upwards in society.

D: Most people do, yes.

N: But her chosen way of life is different.

D: Yes, it has a religious dimension.

N: What do you think of Rose's way of life?

D: Well, she has a way of life that is not concentrated on material goods. And it's not religious. In a sense she is a practising believer, but she has a religion of self-denial in her community rather than of self-advancement.

N: Then, I would like to ask you about your recent novels. You wrote four novels after 2000. They are *The Peppered Moth*, *The Seven Sisters*, *The Red Queen* and *The Sea Lady*. *The Peppered Moth* is a story of four generations. You wrote about family, history and heredity. Compared to your earlier novels, these themes are complicated. I've read *The Seven Sisters* many times, and I feel it's such an intricate novel. What do you think?

D: Well, it's . . . yes. It's a simple story about a woman who loses her husband.

N: Yes, it's a simple story from one point of view. But its content is not so simple. It consists of four chapters. It is a computer journal and in the first chapter you used first-person narration. In the second chapter you used third-person narration. If we focus on the content, there is a climax at the end of the second chapter. But the

novel doesn't end there and continues. You spared only about thirty or forty pages for the third and fourth chapters. But these two chapters are so condensed. You named the title of the third chapter "Ellen's Version" and you used a different narrator here. Ellen pretended to have written this chapter, but actually the heroine, Candida herself, wrote it. In the final chapter you used both first-person and third-person narration. What's more, Virgil's *Aeneid*, book VI, is present in the background. Its content is very similar to that of his version of Aeneas' visit to the Underworld. You used a lot of techniques when writing it. It is such an intricate novel. It seems as if there exists another novel within the novel.

D: Well, I'd forgotten till you reminded me that it has got such a narrative complexity because the actual story is quite simple: the woman leaves her house and goes on a journey with her friends. But I suppose the narrative, the subject, is her discovery of herself as an independent person. And her using different voices is due to trying to find out who she is now that she is alone. And of course all the voices are written by me as a narrative for there are a lot of questions when we write a diary. Do we tell the truth in a diary? Do we lie in a diary? Who is telling the truth? And what is the true story? Or even in a diary, are we trying to make ourselves look good or are we able to tell the truth? I think we can't. And I think even in a diary, we deceive ourselves. So this was . . . it's an experimental novel. It's about a woman writing for the first time. She's not a writer. She is trying to write. But of course, I am a writer. I know what she is doing. So it's about somebody we could say, somebody trying to find out who she is. What is her voice? Now that she is alone, who is she?

N: I suppose because it was a diary, you used several techniques. But in your earlier days you said, "I aim to be lucid."² This novel doesn't seem to accord with your former words. It's completely difficult.

D: Yes, yes. Because of the shift.

N: I am Oriental so I am not very familiar with the Greek myths. You are European and you are familiar with them. When I read through it, it was so complicated that I had to consider it deeply and was thinking of your earlier words. I thought it was different from your words. What do you think?

D: Well, we change. We grow older. We change our ambitions and we change our narrative styles. We change our ways of looking at the world. And my early books were very simple, linear. They just followed one line. This, I think, presents . . . I

see this presents problems to non-European readers because most European readers know the framework of the story of Troy and Aeneas and that journey they go on, and the idea is familiar to the Italians of course and most English readers. So it is expecting from the readers that kind of background knowledge. I can see there is a difficulty if you don't have the same mythological background.

N: Then, do you think it is a difficult novel for Oriental people like myself?

D: I think it probably is. That would be because of the framework being unfamiliar. I think that the emotion of the woman who is alone after being married for a long time and her children, she doesn't really see them very much . . . this is a universal situation. It's a universal woman's situation that the husband has gone off with someone else. She has to make a new life but she interprets her new life through going to the reading group and studying Virgil. I'm sure in Japan, there are people going to reading groups where they study universal stories.

N: Yes, there are, I suppose.

D: I was in Italy a few years ago. My Italian publishers, they all belonged to a reading group and translated my work into Italian. And they were studying James Joyce. I said, "Well, how long do you take?" They said, "All year. We take a whole year. We meet once a week. We have a meal and we talk." So they were taking it very, very seriously over a long period of time. Because it's difficult. And in this group, they're studying Virgil. I have a friend who belonged to a group. They were reading Dante. They were reading Dante in Italian every week and they enjoyed that very much.

N: That is why you used Virgil's epic?

D: Yes.

N: As you say, the framework of the novel itself is simple. It is about a middle-aged woman's life before and after getting divorced. But the way of writing is so complicated, I suppose. You used a lot of techniques.

D: Yes. That's very true.

N: For example, as for the title, *The Seven Sisters*, you put a lot of meaning into it. You meant the seven women who went on a trip to Italy. And you meant the Seven Sisters, a group of stars in accordance with the Greek myths. Is this correct?

D: Yes, there's a Greek group of stars called the Seven Sisters.

N: You also meant the Seven Sisters Station. When Ellen came back to London, she saw it from the window of the train. It was the Seven Sisters Station.

D: There's a very long road in northeast London called Seven Sisters Road. When I was young, I used to walk along that road a lot. That station and that road are a part of my life. Seven Sisters Road, it's not a very nice road. It's a gloomy road.

N: The place Candida moves to is Seven Sisters Road in London.

D: Yes, that's right. Seven Sisters Station, it is on Seven Sisters Road.

N: Only for the title, you had such a lot of meaning. Furthermore, in the novel you used a lot of techniques and Virgil's *Aeneid*, book VI, was present in the background. After *The Seven Sisters*, you wrote *The Red Queen*. It is based on Korea's imperial system.

D: Yes, that is a weird book.

N: You compared 18th-century Korea and present-day Korea. You wrote about two periods at the same time. Compared to your earlier novels, your recent ones are difficult and complicated, I think.

D: It's very difficult, when you are old, to write the simple narrative which you used to write when you were young without repeating yourself. So I suppose with each novel you find new problems for yourself. You create new problems. You find a new way of treating material. I think it's just a natural way or process of growing older. Life becomes more . . . life is many-layered. When you're young, you have just one straight aim. And life seems clear. You have an ambition and an idea. And as you get older, life has many layers of memory and history and I think perhaps my novels have become more difficult because there are so many layers of memories to do with this. But I take your point, for you there is an added difficulty, not only in the techniques but in the material which is very much part of your period history. In the novel set in Korea, what I was doing . . . I went to Korea three or four times and I was so amazed by the strange mixture of westernization and living in a completely traditional culture still. Which is not unlike Japan, where you have this mixture of a very, very modern progressive society. And you also get a culture which is very different from any European culture. I was very interested when I read the story of the 18th-century crown princess. I was amazed at how directly universal that story was although everything in her life was so different. The story was very powerful. So I just became interested in what is universal, what we understand of one another. What we never understand. And that book is about that really. It's about the universal and the different.

N: I understand as we get older, we come to get interested in many things. Your heroines are getting older as you are getting older. When you went to Korea, you said you had had a lot of difficulty in understanding Korean culture. It is because Korean culture is a mixture of modernity, I suppose. We are from Oriental countries and Oriental culture is totally different from Western culture. Do you think it is difficult for us to study British novels?

D: I think it's very difficult, very difficult to understand the background. But it is so for English readers reading Japanese novels. Although there have been one or two very successful contemporary Japanese writers who are widely read in Europe.

N: For example, Kenzaburo Oe?

D: Yes, yes. And there is a young man whose name I can never remember . . .

N: Haruki Murakami?

D: Yes, young people here love him and read his books a great deal. I've read several and it's as though some writers could communicate . . . I mean, Oe always writes about similar themes. He is a very, very powerful writer. There are other Japanese novels that I would probably find more difficult. There has to be a very strong universal theme. But the young man who wrote *Kafka on the Shore*, he's got a very European culture as well. He is a mixture of Japanese and European.

N: Maybe he has lived in Europe?

D: I don't know. But I don't think Kenzaburo Oe had lived much abroad . . . I met him in America. I met him at the Academy of Arts and Lectures. We had a very interesting conversation. And then I met him again in Korea. I met him in Seoul. We were at the same conference and again we had a very interesting conversation. Oe, he was talking about America and the West and how the Asian countries should unite as an Asian block and not be bullied by America. Basically, he was speaking about the Pan-Asia vision of a peaceful politics.

N: By the way, you are on good terms with Doris Lessing, aren't you? She got the Nobel Prize in 2007, in the year she published *The Cleft*. I suppose you know the Irish novelist, Anne Enright. She published *The Gathering* in 2007. These two novels were published in the same year. I think *The Cleft* is totally different from her former novels. She has mainly written about women's lives and social matters. But in this novel she wrote about the beginning of human beings and we are bemused by it. *The Gathering* is also an intricate novel like *The Seven Sisters*. Have you read it?

D: Yeah. I think I did. Is that the one which won a Booker Prize? Yes, I did read it. It's about a family in Dublin. Sort of tragic family of . . . and there's a lot of memory, lots of going back . . . back in time.

N: Recently, I have been reading *The Gathering* and whenever I read it, I always think of *The Seven Sisters*. They are similar, not in the narration. Both seem to have another novel within the novel.

D: It is very difficult now to write a simple novel because post-modernism destroyed the simple novel. People started to write in a layered way and it's very hard to go back. It is very hard now to write a simple narrative. When I was young, I didn't worry about narrative techniques, I just wrote. But now even a young writer starting now, a young literary writer, will be confronted with all these difficulties about choices of narrative techniques. The literary novel has become quite self-conscious. We worry about technique and a lot of novelists, most novelists, use multiple viewpoints, multiple narrative systems . . . some of which I find very difficult, some of which I find quite boring. There's a young writer called David Mitchell and I enjoyed one of his books very much. It was a simple story of a schoolboy having a difficult time at school. It was brilliant, about a neighborhood and the school. He wrote another one which was much more admired, called *Cloud Atlas*. But it is full of historical passages, it's full of sections written in different voices from different historical periods and I don't know what it's about and I stopped reading it. But it's very fashionable now, that kind of narrative layers.

N: You published *The Seven Sisters* in 2002 and Lessing published *The Cleft* in 2007. In that year she got the Nobel Prize and Enright's *The Gathering* got a Booker Prize. I think all of these novels are so intricate. When novelists write novels, I suppose these days they are thinking of writing techniques.

D: Yes, I think they do.

N: When *The Gathering* was nominated for the Booker Prize, Enright said something like "I don't write straight novels."³ Judging from her words, I can assume it is a difficult novel.

D: But I think she also meant to say, "It's not a happy book. It's about a very unhappy subject matter. It's difficult and it's unhappy." And I think she was saying, "I can't write a happy simple book, I can't do that."

N: I suppose another reason she writes difficult novels is that James Joyce or John Banville has influenced her. They are Irish so she has to be conscious of them.

D: Well, Joyce had an enormous influence on all Irish writers and he influenced Banville. There's a whole tradition of Irish literary writing but without Joyce, it wouldn't exist. It was Joyce who created that tradition. Any Irish writer is aware of that. I remember now when I was in Japan, I met somebody who was translating Joyce into Japanese and I thought what an amazing lifework translating was, to translate *Ulysses* into any foreign language but particularly into Japanese. For us it is a very hard book. People who teach or study it, it is their whole life. Their whole life is devoted to Joyce. He is more difficult than anybody.

I: Once you said, "I don't want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years."⁴ But these days your writing style is similar to that of experimentalists. Don't you think so?

D: Yes, yes. I admire James Joyce. I mean, it's not that I don't like his work. I think it's quite a dangerous novel. And I suppose my own work has become more experimental. But . . . yes, there was one branch of experimentalism that I really didn't like, which was the French 1960s and 1970s. But even about that I've slightly changed my mind. I mean, as we grow older, we re-read things, discover different things. You decide something you liked when you were young, you don't like any more, and then discover a new way of writing. So we develop all the time. We go on and on. Even when we're old, we go on changing. And Doris Lessing is a very good example of somebody who moves through many, many styles, through realism, to science fiction, autobiography, historical fiction. She has written dozens of books. They're in very different styles.

N: I am sorry to go back to *The Seven Sisters*, but as for the third chapter, actually Candida herself wrote that part. But you pretended that Ellen had written it. What was your intention?

D: Well, at one point I did think of actually making it the real ending. What I thought was I wasn't sure how the novel would end. I thought maybe if Candida really did commit suicide, which was perfectly possible, then Ellen would write the postscript. So I started writing that section as though Candida had indeed died. Then I thought no, actually she wouldn't die. It wasn't realistic that she should die. She would carry on. I thought that she would've wondered that if she had committed suicide, how her daughter would have reacted to her death. Then I turned her into a kind of a novelist rather than a diary writer. She is sitting there writing a novel about herself. So it happened really as I was trying to work out what would

happen to her. In a more straight novel she would have died. But she didn't. She carried on. That section was a consideration of how near she was to death. But she didn't die.

N: I thought maybe you wanted readers to imagine by themselves. You wanted to give us some thinking time.

D: Yes, of course. That's right.

N: Well, you always write about the relationships between mothers and children. You are repeating this theme. Even in this novel Candida and Ellen are not on good terms. Why are you repeating it?

D: Because it's a very interesting theme about mothers and daughters. I suppose . . . my mother was a very difficult woman and we had a complicated relationship.

N: You have talked about that before.

D: Yes, yes, my mother was difficult. She was an unhappy woman, really. Whereas, my daughter and I get on extremely well. We see each other a lot, speak a lot. We have very happy times. And I suppose I'm very interested in why a relationship can go wrong and how it can be right. I think, generally speaking, parents get on better with their children now. But maybe I'm just lucky with my children. I get on very well with them. They get on very well with each other. But I'm conscious of the fact that's not always the case. There are parents and children who have very, very difficult relationships.

N: You said something like this in another interview: "Mother's love is the most wonderful thing, which is completely different from that between men and women."⁵ You have such an opinion. However, you have written about difficult relationships between mothers and children in your novels many times. Why do you so often write about such relationships?

D: Because many mothers do have bad relationships with their children. I don't but I think some mothers do. And I do think motherhood is very important and I think a child really is a very important part of life. And I suppose when you describe how it goes wrong, that's important. When it goes wrong, it's important. I remember when I was writing that, I didn't think I would explore what it was like to have a difficult relationship with my children. I now have grandchildren and I know some people have a much more intimate relationship with their grandchildren than I do. I was looking at this little grandchild-daughter relationship and just wondering how different it can be . . . Ellen is a difficult person. She disappears. She has a speech

problem. But her mother is also a difficult woman. And I think Candida is not very warm . . . She has had a hard time.

N: That's why her three daughters ignored her when she got divorced.

D: I was portraying a difficult family. They were a difficult family.

N: But don't you think you would like to write about good relationships between mothers and children?

D: Yes, I could. I'm writing one at the moment in which there is a very good relationship but I haven't finished it yet . . . Still, in a novel called *The Middle Ground*, the daughter has a very good relationship with her mother. In fact, it's almost sentimental. She likes her so much. In *The Middle Ground* there is a very positive image of being a good mother. She's a very warm mother and her children love her.

N: Another common theme of your novels is about a heroine who lacks sexuality, I suppose. They don't have intimate relationships with men.

D: Well, in *The Waterfall* Jane's quite sexual.

N: Yes, but what do you think of Rosamund in *The Millstone*?

D: She's typically English, a well-brought-up girl. She's frightened. But she loves her daughter. She's a good mother. She's not easy, not sexual, that's true.

N: Many of your heroines try to avoid sexual intercourse with men.

D: But I think that's a generation thing. I mean, my generation of women, they were very nervous about sex. They were very nervous about having babies. There was no reliable contraception. If you had sex, you had to get married. And the world is completely different now in England. I mean, now people have free and easy relationships. They have sexual relationships without taking them very seriously. We were brought up in a world where it was all very serious and quite frightening. I think that was partly due to the difference of contraception, and the fear of having illegitimate children, too many children. That world has completely changed.

N: Yet, Rosamund gives birth to an illegitimate child.

D: Yes, she does. But she loves the child, not the father.

N: However, her choice of life seems to be unbelievable. She gives birth to a baby without telling the father anything. Furthermore, when she meets him by chance after several years, she shows the baby to him. But she says nothing to him about the father of the baby. Still, she lies about the baby's age so as not to let him know the truth. Her stance seems to be strange.

D: No, she was very inhibited. She was very repressed, inhibited. I think that was characteristic of that time. British women were like that. Times have changed. Nowadays, that situation would be impossible because she would have known about contraception. If she didn't, she would have an abortion. But in those days those choices were not available. So life was very different and her predicament was the result of her ignorance, really. And now, well, some people are ignorant. I mean, in this country we have one of the highest rates of illegitimacy, of teenage pregnancy, in the world. In Europe, in the Western world, we have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy. Nobody knows why. It's really strange.

N: Is abortion still prohibited?

D: No, it is not prohibited, although you do have to get a medical approval. But it's relatively easy.

N: Your theme focuses on such women who hate to have sexual intercourse with men. But judging from your words, they are of the former generation.

D: Yes, I think things have changed.

N: Candida or some of her daughters hate to have sexual intercourse in *The Seven Sisters*.

D: But she is a typical older woman. I mean, Candida herself is typical of my generation. I can't remember the daughters very well.

N: Candida hates sexual intercourse. But you say she belongs to an older generation, and I now understand. Well, excuse me, but I'm afraid that this is all I have prepared for the interview. Thank you for explaining everything to me.

D: Thank you.

Notes

*This is the whole conversation between Margaret Drabble and the interviewer. One part of this conversation has already been published in *Web Rising Generation*, Vol. 158, No.3, June 2012.

1. *The Writer's Place: Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain*, "Margaret Drabble," ed. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1974) 117.

2. *The Writer's Place* 117.

3. Cf., "Anne Enright, 'I Bring All of Myself to a Book,'" *The Man Booker Prizes*, 8 July 2011 <<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/perspective/articles/99>>.

4. Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 65.
5. Diana Cooper-Clark, "Margaret Drabble: Cautious Feminist," *Critical Essays on Margaret Drabble*, ed. Ellen Cronan Rose (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985) 28.